

# A Framers' Road Trip

**Visiting successful framing retailers in several states, I observed common reasons why some businesses thrive while others don't**

By John Raney II, CPF, GCF

*In late June and early July, PFM Mat Doctor John Raney II and his wife, Sarah, took a summer vacation that included stopping at frame shops, galleries, and related gift shops from Wisconsin to Maine. The idea was to gain insights into techniques that local retailers in other towns used that John and Sarah might be able to use in their own shop, the award-winning Frame Workshop of Appleton (WI). John's idea was straightforward: he would ask the store owners that he and Sarah met along their journey what lessons they had learned during the recent lean years that had helped them survive and thrive. To share this information with framers everywhere, PFM sponsored a blog so that others could follow John and Sarah's journey and learn from their discoveries along the way. The blog is still up (<http://johnraneypictureframer.com/tag/busmans-holiday>). Here is a summary of the insights they gained that other framers could use in their businesses. —Ed.*



Amanda Shall, a key employee at Framed in Tatnuck, Worcester, MA, assists a customer with framing. Note the array of finished samples among the moulding corner samples. The immaculate design counter also helps provide a feeling of professionalism.

**T**his past summer, Sarah and I got to see and learn first-hand how each of the retailers we met has kept their businesses moving forward in difficult times. Despite the presence of a major recession from 2007 until today, every one of the retail shops we visited is not only still in business and but is also surviving and thriving. All reported a steady increase in sales and profits over the past five years. Many have expanded or diversified in that time. This includes a number that just opened their doors two to three years prior to the start of the downturn, a critical time for any new business venture. So how have they done it? What sets them apart from the many retail shops that have disappeared?

Although each successful retailer has its own unique situation and operates within the confines and parameters of its immediate environment, there were some key common elements that I feel are a big part of their success.

**Passion** - You can't learn it; it has to come naturally. Some framing retailers wear it on their sleeves every day. You can see these folks shouting from their rooftops, sharing with the world how wonderful their business is and how customers cannot live without it. Others are a bit more subtle, but the passion dis-



Pat and Ken Baur stand next to a framed original painting at Framing Concepts in Chesterton, IN. Their business is in a large, converted old movie theater. The environment they created elicits a feeling of prestige and warmth—a very inviting atmosphere for potential framing clients.



The eclectic atmosphere at Art Etc's in Cleveland's little Italy district is a draw to anyone, regardless of whether they need custom framing or not. The Old World charm is captured inside and out and reflects the personality and years of experience of the owner, Edie Antl.



Tony Cox and wife Heather are the second-generation owners of Casco Bay Frames in Portland, ME. Tony is involved with Portland Buy Local, and he and his staff hold awards they designed and donated to winners of the organization's Independent Business Awards. Each framer at Casco Bay is also an artist.

plays itself in the little details, like creative displays that change on a regular basis, powerful and eye-catching signage, and hours dedicated to do each task well.

Every frame shop and gift boutique visited displayed passion—passion for their products, their name, and their business. Everyone in a retail business faces the emotional challenges that are part of the retail scene, and some of these issues present themselves dramatically. These challenges are magnified in harder economic times and can easily wear down your enthusiasm. Successful retailers recognize that they need to display an uber amount of enthusiasm because it is contagious to both customers and employees. This requires each framing business owner, as the "Captain of the Ship," to balance the demands of business with the personal needs of lifestyle, including diet, rest, and physical health. This is a key to being able to maintain an inner glow. After all, people are counting on you!

**Change** - We observed many times along our journey that, at some point during the past six years, many of the



A great visual display can attract potential customers at any time. This creative use of framed mirrors mounted on rustic barn doors on a walkway outside the Village Framers in Yarmouth, ME, draws in people patronizing neighboring businesses.

shops we visited had recently moved, remodeled, or expanded their product lines. Many had, in fact, expanded into larger facilities or moved to a more visible location. Some had taken advantage of reduced rents during the recession and moved into what had been a previously cost prohibitive location. Many shop owners recognize that, by nature, retailers are risk takers. Thus, they should continue taking some business risk every day, even if that means relocation. It is one of the perennial challenges of retailing.

Sarah and I visited a number of gift boutiques that had changed product lines, dropping those that were poor performers and adding new and trendy items. They sometimes

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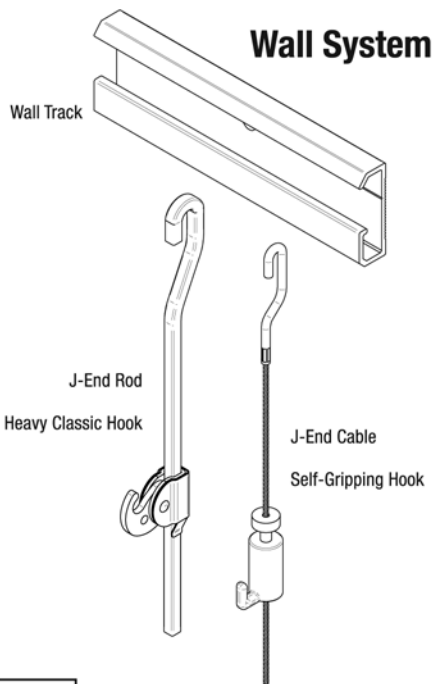
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might add a new line, knowing full well that it might be a short-term relationship designed to add an immediate benefit. Sticking with the same old stuff can be a death sentence in retailing. Similarly, one framer abandoned a gallery portion of his business that had never carried its weight in favor of a Children's After School Art Class studio.

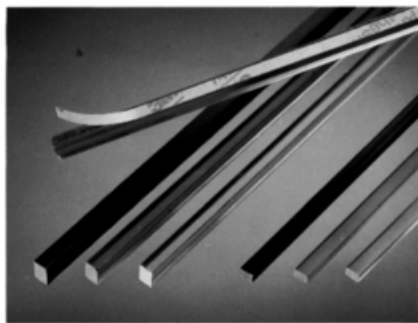
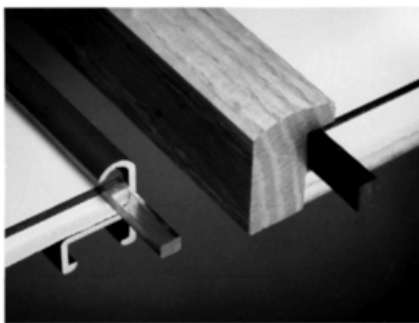
We also noticed a number of frame shop owners embracing diversification by adding more photo frames or other home decor products. Whatever the changes were, they were all done to keep a business fresh and interesting to potential consumers.

**Technology** - Although a business can be run without a point-of-sale software system, the growth and organizational benefits of it are huge, and the benefits cannot be denied. Every single shop visited along our journey, from a one-person framer to a gift shop with a staff of 10, all used some sort of POS software to track customers and record sales. It was quite obvious that a smart business recognizes that staff time is valuable, and embracing technology helps make good use of that time.

One great example was a stop at a small frame shop in an old established neighborhood of a large metro area, and it looked as if the store had been in business for 100 years or more. Looking somewhat like an old cobbler's shop or vintage bookstore in many respects, this was, from a marketing standpoint, this store's "image." It is an image that contains great charm, warmth, and a feeling of old school craftsmanship. Despite this antique patina of this store's appearance, the shop still recognized that it was indeed a different era and was an early adopter not only of POS soft-

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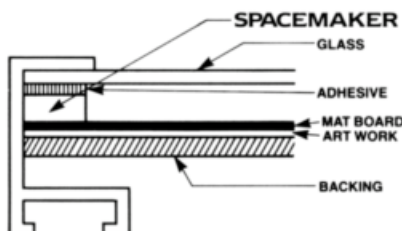
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ware but also a computerized mat cutter in the workshop. Profitable businesses do keep up with industry changes, even if it's not always visible at first glance!

**Delegation** - Often easier to describe than to execute, this key business trait was one that we found common to many of the retailers we visited. Owners knew that to grow their businesses and reach profitable volume, they could not have their hands on every single aspect of their business. This seems a little obvious, but many strong creative and passionate individuals are great at starting a business but have a really hard time allowing others to maintain it as it grows. Many of those we visited have learned to do this well, often crediting a key employee for being a big part of their business success.

These key employees often take on the business as their own and, when nurtured, can often achieve even greater sales success than owners. Sometimes this delegation simply means using outside sources for materials and services to complement a core business.

**Product Knowledge** - Another small detail that can slip between the cracks is keeping up with the ever-changing world of new products, services, and popular lines. We were amazed at the number of picture framers along our trip who not only knew about the latest releases within the picture framing industry but also had the manufacturers' point-of-sale displays for customers to view. Hot new items like Prisma's Acrylic Photo frames or the Urban Ashes Collection of recycled materials were displayed in several shops. Almost every framer had a counter display of Tru Vue's Museum or Conservation glass for customers to compare for themselves. And

they also make regular efforts to stay up on the latest products and ideas by staying informed and attending trade shows, such as the WCAF Expo.

Success in retailing certainly involves more than these five key points, but as Sarah and I observed along the way from the Midwest to New England, these were the common traits that we saw over and over, common denominators that separate successful frame shops and gift boutiques from their competition. ■



**John Ranes, CPF, GCF**, is an instructor of framing workshops and seminars worldwide. He teaches for the National Conference and the PPFA and consults for The Fletcher-Terry Company and Tru Vue. He and his wife, Sarah, own The Frame Workshop of Appleton, a frame shop and gallery in Appleton, WI, which has won more than 90 framing awards, including two successive awards from the Fine Art Trade Guild in the UK and a National Australian Framing Competition award. His shop expanded in 2009 and was featured in PFM in 2010.

